

Fighting Austerity: Our Crisis and Rebuilding Unions from Below

Thursday 11 July 2013, by [GALLIN Dan](#) (Date first published: 19 June 2013).

This is Dan Gallin speech at a conference co-organized by the Global Labour Institute (GLI), Fighting Austerity: Rebuilding Unions from Below, and held in Athens on June 18-19, 2013.

Contents

- [Our Present Crisis](#)
 - [Our Tasks Today](#)
-

Comrades, I want to open a discussion on our crisis, the crisis of the labour movement, because I believe that the multiple crises we are facing in society are ultimately the result of the failures of our movement, and that we cannot effectively deal with those economic, social and political crises unless we overcome our own crisis first.

I also believe that resolving our crisis is our most direct responsibility, that it depends on us alone and that it is a task we must immediately address because time is short.

There was a time when the term “labour movement” had a precise meaning: it meant the movement of the working-class with a political and an industrial wing: the party and the union, which, together with an array of auxiliary and flanking organizations, had a common aim: the emancipation of labour and the establishment of a socialist society. That, at any rate, was the dominant concept up to the second decade of the 20th century.

The present situation could not be more different. The historical alliance of the trade union movement with a mass party representing the working-class has broken down. This did not happen suddenly, it was a long process, over several decades, with many lost battles, for reasons too long to go into here. I want to focus on the outcome of this process, our present crisis, which has several basic elements.

Our Present Crisis

The first is the crisis of social-democracy in Western Europe and elsewhere (India, Japan). The social-democratic labour movement emerged from World War II superficially strong, actually greatly weakened by its losses under fascism and in the war, and far more dependent on State support than it had been before the war. The socialist transformation of society was no longer on the agenda.

In the context of post-war capitalist reconstruction in Europe and Japan, and the division of the

world into two power blocs led by the U.S. and the USSR, many nominally social-democratic and labour parties abandoned their identity as class parties of labour, claimed to represent wider popular interests and adopted policies detrimental to the working-class, dictated by their historical enemies.

Today, there are very few countries in Europe where relations between the trade union movement and its former historical allies are not fraught with difficulties. In effect, the trade unions have lost their political allies.

The second element is the loss of our periphery. The historical labour movement had created a powerful network of auxiliary organizations, covering most aspects of social life: culture, education, social protection, human rights, equality, a workers' press, even military self-defence. These were meant to be the building blocs of an alternative society.

Much of this was lost in the post-war period, where unions retreated to what they believed to be their core business: collective bargaining, leaving society to the State. Because the State, by its nature, cannot substitute itself to society, other social movements have occupied the space left vacant by the labour movement. In that sense, these social movements are the illegitimate children of the labour movement. We need to recognize them as our own.

The third element is the hugely destructive impact of Stalinism. Russia had three or four years of revolution, followed by seventy years of counter-revolution. The countries of Eastern and Central Europe occupied by Russia at the end of World War II had forty years of Stalinism. Hundreds of thousands of socialists, anarchists, syndicalists, dissident communists perished in the "purges" and in the labour camps of that regime, or were assassinated elsewhere in the world, our best people. Together with them the memory of what had been the labour movement in one fifth of the world was obliterated.

Worse yet: Stalinism corrupted and discredited the very concept of socialism, not least with the help of the conservative propaganda. Both sides colluded in this operation, the Soviet side, with its self-described "socialist countries," seeking to legitimize its system as an embodiment of historical socialism, and the conservative side, totally agreeing that the so-called "socialist countries" were indeed socialist, rather than the opposite of everything socialism had ever stood for, seeking to discredit the concept of socialism by equating it with Soviet reality.

When that regime finally collapsed under its own weight, without any workers anywhere rising in its defence, on the contrary, it left a bureaucratic ruling class recycled as a new capitalist class, as corrupt and lawless as it had ever been, and it also left a weak and disoriented labour movement, trying to find its bearings with difficulty, against enormous odds.

Before I leave this survey of the wreckage of the political movements that claimed to represent labour, I should also recall that there have always been dissidents, independent socialists, revolutionary syndicalists, who resisted. There were not many of us, but we fought and lived to fight another day, and that day is today. I believe that we know what we now have to do. The issues are at the same time ideological, political and organizational.

Our Tasks Today

Firstly: today's labour movement is essentially the trade union movement, that is what we have and that has to be our starting point. We have lost to a large extent our traditional political allies, but the trade union movement needs a political dimension. Everything we do is political.

We therefore must recover the politics which are naturally ours, taking as the sole point of departure the interests of our members, which are also the general interests of society.

Socialism remains our goal but, instructed by experience, we know that the meaning of socialism must be radical democracy: real power, democratically exercised, by real people, at every level, not by any substitutes, no vanguard parties, no so-called “progressive” authoritarians. We welcome all reliable political allies, but we cannot delegate the fight for the emancipation of labour to anyone else.

As a socialist, I would not want my party to control any trade unions. As socialists, our role should be to support the independent organizations of the working-class, controlled by their members.

As socialists, we must also break with all forms of sectarianism. Those of us who are Marxists will remember what the *Manifesto* said [1]:

“The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interest separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole. They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which they shape and mould the proletarian movement.”

Too much damage has already been done by those who place the interests of their party or their sect above the interests of the movement. They need to be left to their own isolation.

As a trade union movement, we must break with the ideology of “social partnership,” which has long since been abandoned by our ruling classes. We have no “social partners,” what we have is social counterparts, and that is not the same thing. Rather than lamenting the demise of “social partnership” and “social dialogue,” we need to rebuild power relationships in our favour wherever possible by all means available to us.

Secondly, we need to respond to the changes in the nature of work and to reconstruct the identity of our class, the working-class. In today’s world, a majority of workers are in unstable, precarious, informal forms of employment, and unemployed for much of their working lives. Many are immigrants. All of them are part of our class.

Unions must develop effective structures to organize these workers. We must move beyond a narrow definition of the interests of our members and move toward class responses in new organizational forms and renewed organizations, reflecting the long-term general interest of our members and of society.

This is also an ideological and political task because it requires an inclusive approach to what we believe the working-class to be and to the unions as a social movement.

Thirdly, and in the same order of ideas: we need to remain aware that women represent a huge proportion of the as yet unorganized working-class, with enormous reserves of energy and courage, much of it still untapped and dormant. Despite some progress, the trade union movement remains heavily male dominated. Without a proactive policy of integrating women workers all the way to the top leadership level we deprive ourselves of an essential resource and are left fighting with one hand tied to our back.

Fourthly, there is an issue of structure. Greece, a small country like my own, has some 150 trade unions, between GSEE and ADEDY. That is far too many. Far too many general secretaries. As long as this structure dominates, it will be impossible to create a movement supported by its members alone, without State subsidies collected through taxes. What, today, is to stop the State from shutting you down, like they shut down your television, or your public hospitals?

“Power is not demonstrated by the ability to call 24-hour strikes. Power is demonstrated when the capitalists lose control over the State.”

Yours will remain a fragile and vulnerable movement unless it becomes the means through which the workers collectively rise and exercise their power. Power is not demonstrated by the ability to call 24-hour strikes. Power is demonstrated when the capitalists lose control over the State.

Comrades:

The European labour movement is today the target of an onslaught not experienced since the 1930s. This is not a passing phase. There will not be a return to what was considered normal social relations in the thirty years after the war. The project of contemporary capitalism is the destruction of the labour movement, in Europe, in North America and eventually everywhere else. Their project is the reorganization of world society without organized labour. What they want is a society of slaves.

Greece has become the crucible of this process. Your ruling class is preparing for war. The Golden Dawn nazis are the shock troops of capitalism. You have an army that has a history of military coups whenever democracy inconvenienced your ruling class.

But you have also tremendous opportunities because everything is in flux, there is nothing to lose and everything is possible. Gramsci described the crisis of his time as: the old is dying and the new cannot be born. Our duty in our crisis is to be the midwives of the new: to make sure that the new can be born. There is nothing to stop you from rebuilding your movement to be the most powerful force in your country, as it potentially always has been and as it easily could become.

Do not look to the European trade union movement for inspiration or examples. They have nothing to teach you except how to retreat. Rely on your experience and your imagination and don't be afraid of radical solutions. In our situation, radical solutions are the realistic solutions. Is a general union for all workers imaginable in Greece? Could the GSEE and ADEDY become a single union, One Big Union?

Comrades:

We would welcome the creation of a Greek Global Labour Institute as a partner of our GLI International Network. We have created a free space for discussion and action, and this free space is expanding. We are inviting you to join. You will be joining an invisible International. We have no heavy structures, we do not seek bureaucratic hegemony. We are a network of autonomous and self-determined trade union activists working together, and working with others, with a common purpose: help rebuilding the international movement that the workers of the world need and deserve.

We recognize in you, our comrades in Syriza, the democratic and revolutionary approach which we believe to be the one our movement most needs at this time. We are here today to demonstrate our solidarity and we will stay together until every battle is won.

Dan Gallin

P.S.

* From The Bullet, Socialist Project • E-Bulletin No. 849, July 8, 2013:

<http://www.socialistproject.ca/bullet/849.php>

* Dan Gallin is Chair of the Global Labour Institute (www.global-labour.org), a labour service organization with a secretariat in Geneva.

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>